



4th Sunday of Easter



Date: Sunday, May 7, 2017 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 23:1–6 | **Response:** Psalm 23:1

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:20b–25

Gospel Acclamation: John 10:14

Gospel Reading: John 10:1–10

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Last week we heard about the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and how Jesus went after these two ‘lost sheep’ and found them.

Today we hear a lot about Shepherds and Sheep, and so consequently we call today Good Shepherd Sunday. With the exception of last week’s Gospel from Luke, we have been hearing more from the Gospel of St John since Easter Sunday. This is a more theological Gospel, and offers various images of the Risen Jesus for us to consider. Whether it is Jesus as the bread of life, the light of the world, and now today, the good shepherd, each image is rich and wonderfully nuanced. But today the Gospel writer includes an image we rarely talk about, or talk about as much, that of Jesus being a door.

Jesus is the gateway for us to new life. But let me explain how this image works, because I think like some of his disciples, not all of us understand what Jesus is talking about today. Jesus says that “he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.” So the sheepfold was usually a ringed-off area in a field where the sheep were gathered together overnight. It was usually created by a ring of rocks over which the sheep could not clamber. There was only one way in and out – through the door. But the door to the sheepfold was not an actual door – nor even a gate, it was just an opening between the rocks that walled the sheep together, and in the middle of the opening the shepherd himself would sleep.

Therefore, any person entering through the ‘door’ would wake the shepherd, but a thief would not want to wake the shepherd. Of course, there was safety in numbers so the shepherds used to gather with their different flocks and share the same sheepfold. This is why the Gospel talks about the sheep needing to know their shepherds voice and why the shepherd should know their sheep.... So that in the morning no sheep would be left behind, and the Shepherd would always care for them.

Jesus promises: “if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.” These are the three features to Jesus being the door that are worth thinking about. The first is that whoever enters through the door will be saved. Elsewhere in the Bible we are told that disciples of Jesus will not lose their life, but save it by following Jesus.

The second is that whomever enters can come and go. We must remember where Jesus is talking. He is talking to the Pharisees in the Temple which also had a sheep gate on the Northern wall, but those sheep only ever came into the temple. No sheep was ever known to walk in and out of the Temple! They never left because they were offered as a sacrifice to God. For Jesus to say that sheep could come and go was a challenge to the Jewish system of sacrifice, and a promise of freedom to his disciples.

Thirdly, Jesus promises, in addition to salvation and freedom, that his sheep will find pasture, that is, a home where he and she will never hunger nor thirst. Jesus teaches that anyone who does not enter into the sheepfold to care for the sheep through this gate – Jesus himself – is a thief and a bandit.

As he has said before, no one comes to the Father except through Him. Jesus himself is the gate by which the shepherd goes to the sheep, therefore the only authentic shepherds are those admitted by him. So Jesus is painted as the Good Shepherd, the one who cares for his sheep, who knows them – but more importantly, he is the door

The choice of the image of shepherd shows the contrast of Jesus’ love for sinners and the Pharisees contempt of sinners. The Pharisees were the ‘thieves and robbers’ who do not love the sheep but enter through another door. But in our own time we have shepherds who are not Good. Who rather than protect their flock with their lives, treat their sheep with contempt.

Jesus is our model of the Good Shepherd. In knowing his sheep he is close to them, and we can be close to Him.

Sadly, today it seems that in our civic life it is not the sheep that are held in the secure comfort of the sheepfold, but rather the shepherds themselves who are surrounded by security whilst the sheep are left alone to wander on the hillside, and are prey to the wolves and to bandits.

Perhaps the advice in our First Reading is applicable to our current shepherds who are in sore need of the Holy Spirit to guide them. For Peter announces Jesus as the Lord and Messiah and tells his hearers to “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and [then] you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”.

Our parish is going to be having a whole parish catechesis at 11 o’clock in two week’s time where we shall focus on Baptism. It is a wonderful sacrament. Times have changed of course, I’m not sure we could baptize three thousand people in one day, but it sure does feel like we need to baptize three thousand shepherds in our country at the moment. Our second reading asks those who stray to return to their life to the Shepherd and Guardian of souls.

Let us pray that our civic leaders might heed that call. Let us today pray that we might have leaders worthy of the name of Good Shepherd. Let us pray that all might turn away from corruption, from being thieves and robbers. Let us pray for our country. And finally let us pray for our pastors and leaders in the Church, that they might know the smell of their sheep and truly care for them. Amen.

Source: <https://sj.mcharlesworth.fr/homilies/2017-05may-07-ya-et-04/>

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